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Riemenschnitter, Andrea Hong Anrui

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REZENSIONEN / COMPTES RENDUS / REVIEWS

CHOW, Rey: *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012. 194 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-822-35230-3.

As one of the fortunate modern China scholars who were, for more than 20 years now, constantly inspired by Rey Chow's astute interventions in the cultural dynamics of globalization, I must first acknowledge that her sharp analysis of the politics of contemporary culture, including the often surprising twists of her conclusions, makes every effort to follow her theory-saturated arguments worthwhile, but at the same time constitutes a considerable challenge for classroom purposes. As she invites her readers to distant journeys crossing the rough seas of gender studies, postcolonial, cultural and media studies, critical theory, discourse analysis and post-structuralism as well as their enlightenment and modernist predecessors, our tiny life-boats (assembled from the limited set of ideas about aesthetic representation, language, history, translation, moral values, gender/class/ethnic distinctions, and other less-than-solid boards that we managed to collect in undergraduate teaching) seem to be commandeered by this Richard Parker-like beast of a Chowean deconstruction. And we know it is going to become the opposite of an intimate enemy (or, if you like, a truly postcolonial intimate enemy): menacing in its disinterestedness in any gains beyond the nourishing of its embodied mind, therefore untameable, and ultimately life-saving – because Richard Parker is a coextension of Pi and vice versa.¹ While we have understood, meanwhile, that each of these journeys is most likely to fundamentally change our view on a number of issues, there is rarely enough time to appreciate them during the thunder and lightning of her argument. At times, I could not help imagining that it must be rather disappointing to have offered the copious returns of her precarious expeditions to academic audiences and to receive but a trickle of immediate, (honorable) critical feedback. Of course, I am not talking about those enemies of critical discourse who would simply dismiss the whole journey as a capricious departure from the variety of homely, more or less theory-free comfort zones within the humanities that they

1 I am referring to the filmic rendition of Yann MARTEL's novel *Life of Pi* (2001 / Li Ang, 2012).

proudly continue to inhabit no matter how much the world has changed since they were built and how many Richard Parkers are being extinguished out there, only to metamorphose into other, ever more powerful and violent cosmic forces doomed to return and haunt our planet.² The only answer Rey Chow could possibly offer to this attitude is: so long as you subscribe to the power of those super-human agents who enshrine your privileges together with their own, *you* will *probably* still be fine.³

Rey Chow, to tell the truth, does not explicitly discuss environmental issues in this book.⁴ But her work on entanglements, as will be demonstrated shortly, reaches far beyond her own, carefully chosen examples. It can theoretically inform the study of a broad range of mediatized stagings, including our entrapments in harmful cultural patterns that have led to the present planetary environmental degradation. So, when the seas have calmed and I hold the print record of her analytical journey in my hands like a pair of binoculars, I begin to distinguish the coastline of a distant island. What are the conditions for survival *there*?

In eight chapters and a postscript Chow explores uncharted entanglements and potential connections on behalf of “a series of recurrent, overlapping issues: the status of the mediatized image in relation to reflexivity; capture and captivation; mimetic violence, victimization, and forgiveness; and the place of East Asia in

2 See, for instance, JAGMOHAN: *Crisis of Environment and Climate Change*. Allied Publishers, 2008; WHITE, Rob: *Transnational Environmental Crime: Toward an Eco-global Criminology*. Routledge, 2011.

3 The problem of hidden power structures within academia is tackled in *Ethics after Idealism: Theory, Culture, Ethnicity, Reading*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998; *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002; and “Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem.” In: *boundary 2* 25, No. 3 (1998): 1–24. Philology, in its orientalist denomination, is certainly not the only academic discipline that nurtured a kind of complicit expert knowledge supporting ideologies from colonialism to neoliberal capitalism and thus furthered what Chow calls the suspension of basic social affects, such as compassion – comprising a genuine concern for the suffering of others (p. 29 f.). For a historical analysis of these same mechanics in the sciences during the 20th century see ORESKES, Naomi, and Erik M. CONWAY: *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Press, 2010.

4 However, on p. 2, FN 2, she aligns the notion of entanglement with its scientific applications in quantum physics and biosemiotics – like environmental philosophy does; see: SARKAR, Sahotra: *Biodiversity and Environmental Philosophy: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

globalized Western academic study” (p. 1). The author thus proceeds in reflexive loops that gradually disclose a spectre of hidden relationships “among things, things and humans, and among different media” (p. 10). Her meditations on the subliminal dynamics of certain attachments, entanglements and stagings, or modes of screening and framing, reflect a dauntless, inquisitive attitude towards modernity’s most jealously guarded epistemic certainties and social boundaries. Tracking down an emergent new order of things – triggered by cinematographic maneuvers of space and time and operative in recently fashionable procedures that break up, blur and derange our conventional classificatory categories – Chow sees two kinds of convolution at work: the tangle that holds things together according to their perceived nearness and likeness, equivalence, conjunction and intersection; and another, simultaneously unfolding dynamics of capture through (constructions of) disparity, partition and partiality. Within these layered, conceptual in- and out-foldings, her attention focuses on three distinct, yet potentially overlapping, enactments of capture: as artifice, force, and momentum.

Looking at capture as artifice means, for example, to reposition Brecht’s epic theatre with an eye to the current politics of cultural production under a globalized regime of exchange and substitution. This regime of staging and mimicking variety was already well underway in Benjamin’s time, who in 1939 used the tableau of a family row to explain the function of the alienation effect in epic theatre: seen from the perspective of a stranger who suddenly appears at the door in the moment of high drama, the dynamics of crisis is interrupted and the heated conflict halted for cool analysis. In order to resist the capitalist regime’s industrialized forms of culture which already relied on the endless reproduction of classical themes, Brecht, Benjamin and others had turned to a politicized reception involving phenomena of doubling, slippage and non-coincidence, all of which aimed at an objectification of aesthetic reflexivity. Later, however, due to the seamless alignment of neoliberal economic strategies with the aesthetic key operation of montage – a principle of scattering into fragments that can be liberally reassembled and redistributed, and which embraces easily abusable tactics like partitioning, stripping bare, exhibiting, and desensitizing – Brecht’s initially emancipatory assault on the emotional spectator encountered more and more problematic entanglements between realities, art, and reflexivity. The movies of the Austrian director Michael Haneke are taken as evidence for a complicity between the cool, bourgeois protagonists and their multiple doubles: as victims, collaborators, spectators; to any of whom, Chow contends, the screened brutal acts of uncovering some deep dark secrets, staged as extreme

revelations, ultimately may mean nothing. The author alerts us to the resulting aporia, asking how we are to distinguish between the socially constructive, liberalizing forms of “estrangement-as-laying-bare” and those other, malicious, dehumanizing forms of pornographic reasoning that ground the production of today’s material culture and its consumers?⁵

This is how the figure of the trap enters the scene as a privileged signifier for art, and for the indistinction of art and non-art. Chow engages critically with an eclectic selection of movies and novels from Rancière’s close reading of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* through experimental re-assemblages of staged traumata in German, Chinese, Korean and Japanese movies. She looks at these narratives through the lens of originally Christian, secularized values, challenging our ideas about the category of attachment by repositioning it as defiance of ideological demands; or its flipside, identification by unveiling its inner dynamics as seeking (imagined) shelter from guilt; or probing the notions of forgiveness and letting go from an unexpected, fresh angle. However, capture as force may also be seen at play in the most unspectacular surface phenomena of our daily lives, for instance, when users of miniature digital appliances are perceived as both agents and victims of a (Foucauldian) logic of entrapment. Entrusting their harvest of images, which testify to such diverse phenomena as human rights transgressions by state representatives and intimate details of their own private lives, to an extended, continuously multiplying scheme of public visibility, the users turn themselves into subjects of surveillance in a paradoxical, ambiguous sense (p. 167 f.). Does this mean that they become victims of their own cool gadgets? Not really, contends Chow, as this notion, and in particular, the social functionality, of the victim is also ambiguous. Tracking a primitive logic of randomly choosing and killing surrogate victims behind today’s “political-power-gone-berserk the world over”, Chow with the help of Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Rancière, and others dissects the mythic narratives of *homo sacer*, or sacrifice as identity marker, and exposes victimized groups as the unexceptional bearers of a normalized, systemic social function. In a theater of cruelty that is performed by modern states in order to temporarily ease the dominant group’s (nation’s) fundamental lack of cohesion, these surrogate victims continue to function as “monstrous doubles” of a society’s antagonistic competitors, and violence is still serving as script “to save others (like them)

5 See, for instance, MAXWELL, Richard, and Toby MILLER: *Greening the Media*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, and ONG, Aihwa: *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

from some larger horror,” brought about by an “endless frenzy of retaliations” (p. 101 f.). But does opposition to this regime of ritualized mimetic desire mean that we need, and are free, to expurge from our cultural imaginary all ideas about sacrifice and mimesis (ch. 4)? Or put differently, can we imagine alternative patterns of preserving a social order which are not, in some way or another, based on mimetic violence? This, as many others throughout the book, remains an open question.

The figure of capture as momentum, finally, crystallizes in the photographic image of a “decal in the shape of a bird spreading its wings, hung or pasted on a window to prevent birds from crashing into the glass.” (p. 183) The repeated abduction – leading to epiphany – of a scare-crow is staged in a series of transmedial re-assemblages; first, as friendly “anti-lure” (eco-)idea-image, and second, as its simultaneously estranged and liberated shadow projection on a Museum floor “like a fugitive from another world” (p. 185), performed by an external, non-human agent, which is the carefree, bordercrossing sunlight. This fugitive shadow is, in turn, captured by the bypassing artist-photographer (Julian Rohrer) and reintroduced into the human sphere as aesthetic scene built upon reminiscences of an ancient religious symbol, the Christian divine embodiment of peace and spirituality as flying dove – which Chow does not disclose, leaving to her readers space for their own meditations.

The human-shaped island that our contemporary, shipwrecked global civilization is heading for is quite foreseeably going to be a very strange place: while extremely few species will be good at adapting to the (maybe) predictable eruptions of increasingly poisonous vapors, others are reduced to bare-life struggles, while the majority will have vanished for lack of the comfort of a divine, planetary Noah’s Arch. Pi and Richard Parker visit, recharge, and depart from this future at their own peril, only to successfully return to a better yesterday. When Richard Parker (the trapped, confined beast impatient to be free again) disentralls Pi by terminating the compulsory partnership as soon as possible, walking away upon having reached the land without looking back even once, spectators of *Life of Pi* are finally released from a sensual cinema that has somehow sidestepped the infinitely reproductive spirit of the “ultimate lure of porn”, which even in its production of discursive dissent relies on an “ever pervasive metaphysical yearning for the purity of the void” (p. 30). Chow, in her book, identifies such a spirit as the opponent of an emancipatory, democratizing aesthetic performativity. But what role can this other spirit play, captured – and captivated – as it is in a grid of money worship, useless and very often harmful

consumer good overproduction, and sovereign states competing, in mimetic or not-so-mimetic violence, for places beyond their own borders where they can exploit more natural resources or grab uncontested space to dump their toxic waste? The journey through *Entanglements* may lead readers to end up, in some way or another, like Pi: in perplexity. This book does not belong to the kind of cuddly, faithful, knowledge-delivering domestic companion; rather, it is a stern reminder about the loneliness of those cultural workers and their spectators/readers who never chose the foundations of our – in so many ways – dehumanizing, unsustainable way of life, nor ever understood how to escape from it. Somewhere along the road, Pi and Richard Parker must have swapped positions.

Andrea Riemenschnitter

DENECKE, Wiebke: *The Dynamics of Masters Literature: Early Chinese Thought from Confucius to Han Feizi*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: Harvard University Press, 2010. viii, 370 pp. ISBN 978-0-674-05609-1.

Many scholars have voiced their concerns about how contemporary philosophical engagement with early Chinese thought falls short due to a resilient and mistaken reliance on the vocabulary of “Western philosophy”. The declared aim then is usually to understand these texts on their own terms, which, of course, is rather quixotic to the extent that such an attempt relies on translation, too, and thus on a more than likely departure from the terms that one initially sets out to understand. Aware of this hermeneutical quandary, some scholars turn to the vocabulary of what they conceive as less dominant strands within “Western philosophy”, thus altering the line of criticism of contemporary philosophical engagement with early Chinese thought: it is no longer the vocabulary of “Western philosophy” per se that is considered inadequate, but some parts are found more (in)adequate than others (say, Dewey, Heidegger, Levinas or Derrida are for some reason often found more adequate than Plato, Aristotle or all of analytic philosophy). Other scholars embark on a more radical course trying to dispense with philosophical vocabulary altogether and stay uncommitted to any and all disciplinary boundaries. It is in this broader context of (philosophical) historiography that Wiebke Denecke’s book on Masters Literature finds its place; for hers is an explicit attempt to frame the “inquiry into this text corpus through the lens of other disciplines, questions, and concerns for our time”, i.e. decidedly not through the lens of a “Chinese philosophy” fashioned in the image